Chapter 75: Lantern Plants

...SHI.
SIR JINSHI!
SIR JINSHI!
PLEASE, YOU MUST HOLD IT TOGETHER.
DO NOT CONCERN YOURSELF WITH A LADY-IN-WAITING'S GAMES.
AH!
GAMES... POISON IS A GAME?

GAO SHUN...
DO I REALLY RESEMBLE HIM?
THIS HAS WEIGHED ON ME EVER SINCE I WAS A CHILD.
I DIDN'T LOOK LIKE HIM.
NOR DID I LOOK LIKE MY BROTHER, NOR MY MOTHER.
SO I ALLOWED MYSELF TO BELIEVE SPURIOUS RUMORS.
THAT I WAS THE PRODUCT OF AN AFFAIR.

...TO LET ME RELINQUISH MY TITLE AS CROWN PRINCE, AND TAKE UP THE MANTLE OF A EUNUCH.
I BESEECHED MY BROTHER...
ALL I CAN THINK TO DO IS LAUGH.
HAH.

I'VE HEARD THESE CAN BE USED FOR ABORTION MEDICATION.
LANTERN PLANTS?
AND A NAME I'LL NOT SOON FORGET.
A COMMON NAME FOR WOMEN BORN IN THE COUNTRY-SIDE.
THE NAME "TAIHOU" IS ENGRAVED HERE.
SHE PASSED ON LAST YEAR...
...AND HAD ONLY ONE RELATIVE.
THE NAME OF A PITIABLE WOMAN WHOSE ONLY JOY IN LIFE WAS GATHERING GHOST STORIES.

TWO YEARS BEFORE THE EMPEROR WAS BORN...
...TAIHOU BORE A DAUGHTER. AN ILLEGITIMATE CHILD, FATHERED BY A COURT PHYSICIAN.
THE CHILD AND THE PHYSICIAN WERE BOTH EXILED...
...AND REMAIN UNAC-COUNTED FOR.
IF THAT GIRL STILL LIVES ...
...THAT WOULD BE A LEAD.
WHEN SHE GAVE BIRTH, TAIHOU SERVED A SPECIFIC CONSORT.
LOULAN'S MOTHER, AND SHISHOU'S CURRENT WIFE.

IF TAIHOU WAS RELATED TO THAT CONSORT ...
THAT WOULD GIVE HER, AND HER DAUGHTER, A DIRECT RELATION TO THE SHI CLAN.
SO IF ANYONE MIGHT KNOW OF THE VANISHED DOCTOR AND THEIR DAUGHTER ...
...IT MAY VERY WELL BE HER.
GARNET PALACE

HER MAKEUP RESEMBLES A FOX TODAY.
CONSORT LOULAN MUST BE WELL AWARE THAT...
...HER EXTRAVAGANT DISPLAYS ARE NOT AT ALL TO THE EMPEROR'S TASTE, RIGHT?

WHSP
WHSP

SIR JINSHI, PLEASE!
EVEN YOU MUST ABIDE BY—
TROMP
TROMP
WHAT IS IT?
...SO I EVEN MEMORIZE THE SHAPES OF THEIR EYES AND BEAUTY MARKS.
SO MANY OF THEM ARE OF SIMILAR HEIGHT AND BUILD...
I MAKE SURE TO MEMORIZE THE NAMES AND ORIGINS OF EVERY LADY-IN-WAITING WITHIN THESE WALLS.

FWAP
WHAT ARE YOU —?!
WIPE
SEVEN LADIES-IN-WAITING SERVE THE CONSORT, CORRECT?
A BEAUTY MARK ON YOUR TEMPLE. YOU ARE... SOURIN—
NO. NO, YOUR NAME IS RENPU, ISN'T IT?

SIR JI—
PALE
GLARE
JOLT

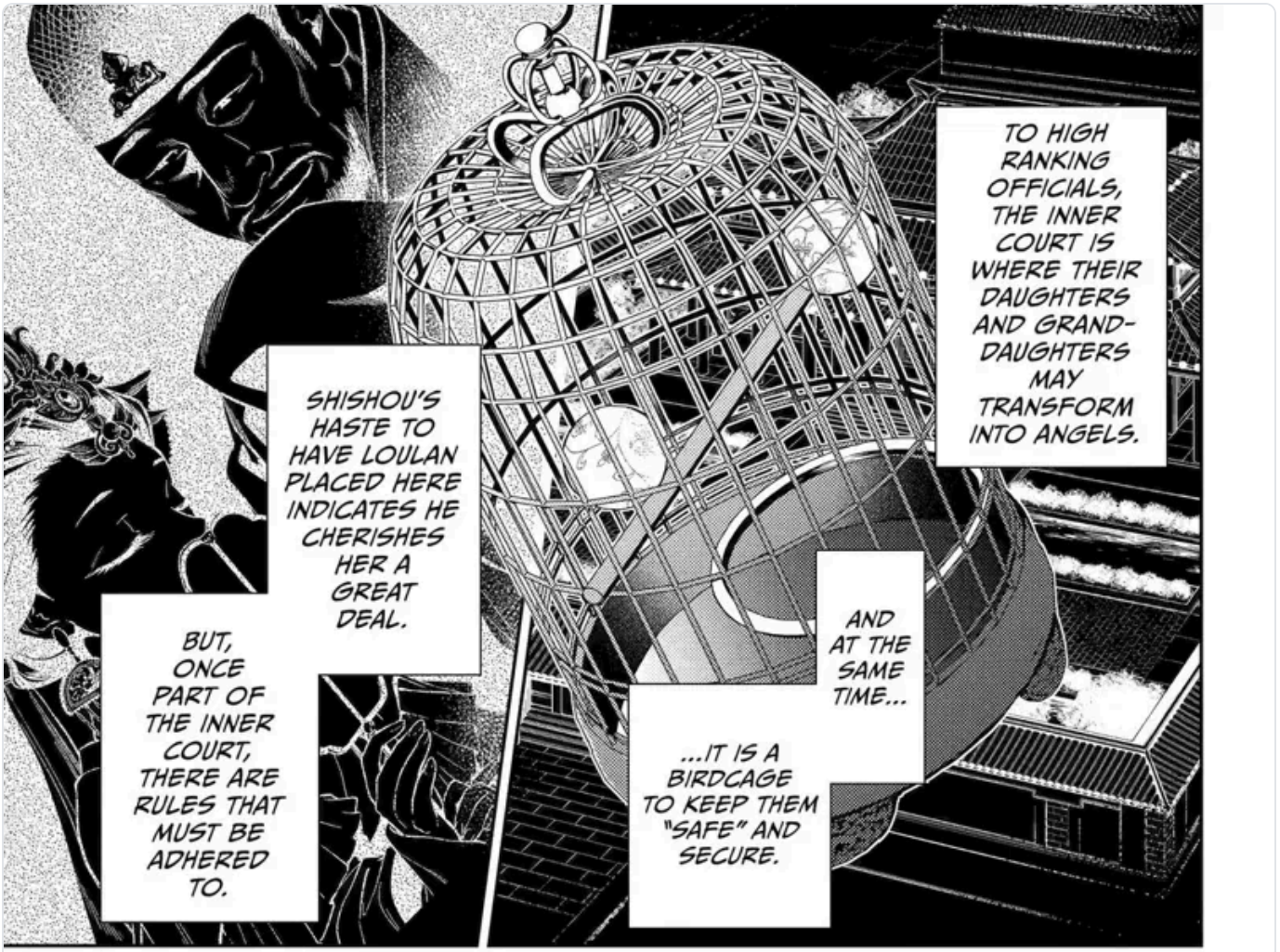
WHERE IS THE REAL LOULAN?
HAH
HAH
SHIVER
SHIVER

FWAP
OUR DEEPEST APOLOGIES!
PLEASE, SHE DOESN'T KNOW ANYTHING!
SHE WAS ONLY CHOSEN BECAUSE SHE RESEMBLES THE CONSORT THE MOST!
WHERE IS SHE?

GLANCE
...I BEG YOU, PLEASE FORGIVE HER...
DRIP
DRIP

AND THE CONSORT?
SHE...
...HAS SAID SHE WILL NOT RETURN.

THAT WAS A MISTAKE.
SUCH BRUTISH, HEAVY-HANDED CONDUCT IS UNBECOMING OF JINSHI THE EUNUCH.
BUT...
...I'M JUST NOT IN MY RIGHT MIND. I CAN'T STAY CALM.


TO HIGH RANKING OFFICIALS, THE INNER COURT IS WHERE THEIR DAUGHTERS AND GRAND-DAUGHTERS MAY TRANSFORM INTO ANGELS.
SHISHOU'S HASTE TO HAVE LOULAN PLACED HERE INDICATES HE CHERISHES HER A GREAT DEAL.
BUT, ONCE PART OF THE INNER COURT, THERE ARE RULES THAT MUST BE ADHERED TO.
AND AT THE SAME TIME...
...IT IS A BIRDCAGE TO KEEP THEM "SAFE" AND SECURE.

IF SHE WON'T BE COMING BACK...
...THEN SHE'S ALREADY LEFT.
...FLEEING THE INNER COURT CAN BE A CAPITAL OFFENSE.
FOR THE HIGH-RANKING CONSORTS ESPECIALLY ...
BUT THEN...

COULD THAT HAVE BEEN HER PLAN FROM THE VERY BEGINNING?
...TO FACILITATE A BODY DOUBLE FOR WHEN SHE ESCAPED?
...AND CONSTANTLY CYCLED THROUGH FLAMBOYANT OUTFITS...
...COULD SHE HAVE BROUGHT IN A LARGE ENTOURAGE OF LADIES-IN-WAITING THAT LOOK LIKE HER...
FOR WHAT PURPOSE?
...HAS BEEN DETAINED TOGETHER.
FOR NOW, EVERYONE CONNECTED TO LOULAN ...
HER LADIES-IN-WAITING WERE ALL IN THE DARK.

WE'VE COMBED THE PALACES IN THE INNER COURT ONE BY ONE, PERSON BY PERSON...
...AND HAVEN'T FOUND ANYONE RESEMBLING LOULAN.
THAT LADY-IN-WAITING, SHENLÜ, POISONED HERSELF ...
BY DRINKING THE ALCOHOL MAOMAO HAD RETRIEVED FROM THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE.
SO THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT MAOMAO RAN INTO SHENLÜ JUST BEFORE DISAPPEARING.
SHENLÜ KNOWS, BUT REMAINS UNCONSCIOUS.
CONSIDERING WHO MAOMAO IS...
...SHE MAY HAVE GONE ALONG WITH WHOEVER TOOK HER WILLINGLY.

WITH THE FORMER EMPEROR GONE, SHE MUST HAVE TURNED HER RESENTMENT TOWARD THE INNER COURT ITSELF.
SHE SEEMS OPENLY INVOLVED WITH THIS LITTLE REBELLION.
SHENLÜ WAS ALSO ACQUAINTED WITH TAIHOU.

...MAY HAVE COOPERATED WITH HER, NOT KNOWING THE FULL EXTENT OF THE SITUATION.
THE REST OF THE WOMEN OF THE INFIR-MARY...
LIKELY BECAUSE ...
...LIKE SHENLÜ, EACH ONE WAS A VICTIM OF THE FORMER EMPEROR.

I CAN'T BE PRESENT FOR CONSORT GYOKUYO'S DELIVERY AS THINGS STAND.
FWM
FWM
I SUPPOSE IF ANYTHING HAPPENS, GAO SHUN WILL LET ME KNOW.

YES, BASEN?
WELL ...
A REPORT, SIR JINSHI.
LET ME IIIN
...A SHORT TIME AGO...
...SIR LAKAN ATTEMPTED TO FORCE HIS WAY INTO THE INNER COURT.

WHERE IS MAOMAO'S SCENT?!
SNFF
SNFF
WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT MONOCLED STRATEGIST THINKING...?
GRP...
ALSO...
IT WOULD SEEM THAT THE WORD IS OUT.
WE HAVE HAD NO SUCCESS IN DETERMINING SHISHOU'S WHEREABOUTS.
I SEE.

RIGHT NOW, LOULAN HAS LEFT THE INNER COURT.
IN LIGHT OF THAT, HER FATHER MUST BE CONSIDERED NOTHING LESS THAN AN ENEMY TO THE EMPEROR.
I'D LOVE NOTHING MORE THAN TO LEAP FROM MY DESK AND LOOK FOR LOULAN PERSONALLY ...
...BUT WE HAVE TOO LITTLE TO GO ON.
I CAN'T AFFORD TO APPEAR SO DISTRESSED BEFORE A GUEST.
PARDON ME.
SIR JINSHI.
HAAH...
GLANCE

A PLEASURE TO MEET YOU.
MY NAME IS KAN LAHAN.
...AND A NAME BEGINNING WITH "LA."
THE FAMILY NAME KAN...

IN THE COUNTRY OF "LI," THERE EXISTS THE TRADITION ...
...OF CERTAIN FAMILIES PASSING DOWN A CHARACTER IN THEIR GIVEN NAME, NAMES THAT WERE ORIGINALLY CONFERRED BY THE EMPEROR MANY AGES PAST.
CURRENTLY WITHIN THE IMPERIAL COURT, THERE ARE ONLY TWO BEARING A "LA" WITHIN THEIR NAMES.
GRIN
...THE TACTICIAN'S ADOPTED SON, HAVE FOR ME?
AND WHAT BUSINESS WOULD YOU...
I WOULD LIKE YOU TO TAKE A LOOK AT THIS.
SWSH

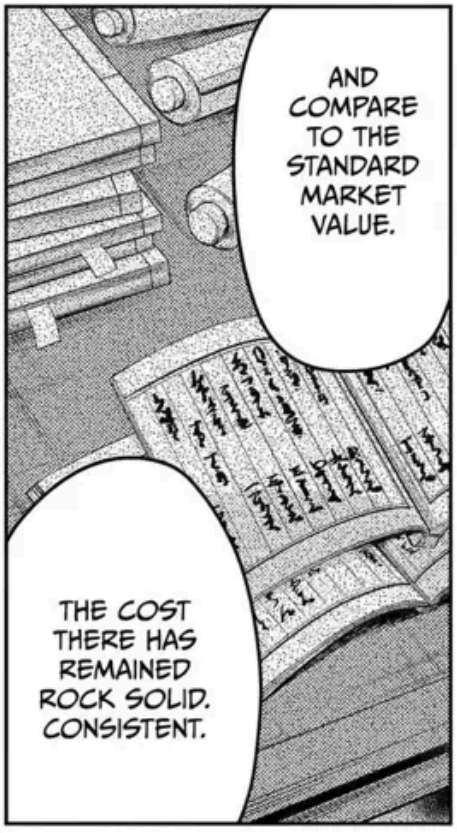
HE SURE SEEMS PROUD OF HIMSELF.
YOINK

...?!
BUT THIS SEEMS TO BE NOTHING MORE THAN A SIMPLE FINANCIAL LEDGER.
SHWP

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
THAT WAS WHEN A FEW RECURRING TRENDS CAUGHT MY EYE.
I BEGAN BY LOOKING INTO THE DEALINGS OF THE MEN WHO HAD ONLY RECENTLY BEEN PUNISHED.
FATHER FINDS IT VERY PECULIAR THAT THE ORIGIN OF THE FEIFA IS STILL SUCH A MYSTERY.
SO PECULIAR, HE ASKED ME TO INVESTIGATE.
THE SHEER VOLUME WAS SOMEWHAT OVER-WHELM-ING...
...SO I'VE ONLY EXTRACTED WHAT IT WAS THAT REALLY STUCK OUT.
...HAS GROWN AT AN ASTON-ISHING RATE, IN BOTH SCOPE AND COST.
IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, ONE DEPARTMENT IN PARTIC-ULAR...
HE'S ALSO ARRANGED IT TO BE READILY UNDER-STAND-ABLE.
HE DID MORE THAN THAT.

WE'VE SUFFERED NO DROUGHTS, NO PLAGUES OF LOCUSTS.
WHY HAS THE PRICE OF GRAIN INCREASED?
IS IT NOT STRANGE?

AND GOING ALONG WITH THE INCREASE IN GRAIN COST...
...OTHER RESOURCES HAVE STEADILY CLIMBED IN PRICE, TOO.
...BUT THE SHEER VOLUME OF GRAIN TRADED TURNS THAT INCREASE INTO A DRAMATIC AMOUNT.
THE PRICE OF THE GRAIN HASN'T INCREASED ALL THAT MUCH...


AND COMPARE TO THE STANDARD MARKET VALUE.
THE COST THERE HAS REMAINED ROCK SOLID. CONSISTENT.

SO HE MEANS TO SAY...
...SOMEONE HAS BEEN EMBEZZLING THE INCREASE IN FUNDS, THEN?
AND WHY HAS THE PRICE OF IRON INCREASED, AS WELL?
IN FACT, METALS OF ALL KINDS HAVE BECOME MORE AND MORE EXPENSIVE.
WHY? IS SOMEONE CONSTRUCTING A GRAND STATUE SOMEWHERE?
HE'S NO LESS SHREWD THAN HIS ADOPTIVE FATHER.

THE PRICE OF METAL INCREASING MUST MEAN SOME VENTURE IS INCREASING DEMAND.
AN ELABORATE VENTURE SUCH AS... A GREAT BIG MONUMENT TO DEMONSTRATE INFLUENCE?
POTS AND FARMING MATERIALS COULD BE GATHERED AND MELTED DOWN TO THAT END.
IF THERE WERE SOME DIFFERENT REASON... COULD IT BE THAT—
YOU NEED ONLY ASK, AND I WOULD BE HAPPY TO LOOK INTO IT FURTHER.

THE CIRCULATION IN THE PAST FEW YEARS ...
...AND WHERE IT ALL ULTIMATELY WINDS UP.
WAS THAT WHAT HE WANTED TO GET AT FROM THE BEGINNING?
HIS EYES SAY MORE THAN HIS MOUTH DOES.
AH...
WHAT WOULD YOU WANT IN RETURN, EXACTLY?

THERE IS THE MATTER OF THE DAMAGE FATHER'S DONE TO THE INNER COURT'S WALLS, AND THE COST OF REPAIRING THEM.
請求書
WOULD YOU CONSIDER...?
VERY WELL.
HE CAME ALL THIS WAY SO SOON AFTER THE COMMOTION IN QUESTION.
MEN BEARING "LA" IN THEIR NAME ARE NOT TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY.